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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003260

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: GOI, KRG CONFLICT OVER BARZANI DECREE BANNING
IRAQI FLAG IN KURDISTAN REGION

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Daniel Speckhard for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) In a meeting with President Talabani on September 2, the Charge raised the issue of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masud Barzani's recent Kurdistan decree No. 60 on banning the raising of the current Iraqi flag in KRG-administered territory. Talabani attempted to clarify the decree, stating that the decree only banned the recent Saddam Husayn designed Iraqi flag and replaced it with the old Iraqi Republic flag. Talabani hastened to add that the new Iraqi flag, once designed, would be flown. He acknowledged Barzani's bad timing, and said he would talk to Barzani avoiding further fueling the fire on this potentially sensitive issue.

¶2. (C) Subsequent to this conversation, there was a public exchange between Barzani and Sunni leader Saleh Mutlak on September 1-2, during which Mutlak threatened the KRG by saying "What was taken by force today, will be returned by force another day." Barzani responded by declaring that if the KRG decided to secede from Iraq they would do so "without hesitation or fears." Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's office, however issued a terse statement on September 3, which read: "The current Iraqi flag is the only one which must be hoisted on each bit of Iraq's land until a decision is adopted by the parliament according to the Constitution." Asked for comment, Talabani's office replied that the situation was "exaggerated noise; the Kurdistan National Assembly was forced to take this step by the blunder of the National Assembly" and the "Constitutional vacuum" that failed to adequately address the long-simmering issue over the Saddam Husayn-era flag. Although Barzani claimed in the press on September 4 that he had consulted Maliki and Talabani on his plans prior to announcing his decision on the flag issue at the KNA on September 1, Maliki's office has not confirmed this conversation.

¶3. (C) In a telephone conversation on September 4, Presidency Council Chief of Staff Kamran Karadaghi informed PolOff that Barzani's position on the flag issue is not new, and did not merit the kind of scrutiny it was currently receiving. Karadaghi confirmed Barzani's statement that both Talabani and Maliki were informed in advance of his announcement of the decree banning the current Iraq flag from being flown in the KRG. Karadaghi also stressed that there should be consistency in the approach to these issues: for example, he indignantly pointed out, both the flag and the national anthem are Saddam-era relics but there is only such hysteria over the flag. He did, however, note that he believed Barzani would not back down from his position - especially since Talabani had now publicly defended him - and that Maliki would have to "eat his words, since he made the decision to issue a statement that was so strongly worded on the flag."

¶4. (U) Press reports indicate that CoR Deputy Speaker Khalid Al-Attiya is considering a special committee in the CoR to address the flag issue. The CoR reconvenes on Tuesday, September 5. POL will continue to monitor the situation closely.

¶5. (C) POL is contacting sources in the KRG to get more clarity on the specifics of the decree, but note that Karadaghi's statement that the KRG has historically refused to fly the current Iraqi flag is consistent with our own observations. Throughout the past year, PRTs Kirkuk and Mosul, as well as the USAID representative in Erbil, have reported that KRG-administered areas do not fly the Iraqi flag even over government buildings. Only after repeated complaints have the airports in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah flown the old Iraqi republic's flag (the one designed after the fall of the monarchy in Iraq) at the VIP arrival terminals.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) It appears as though Barzani's decision to make a public display of what he has been saying and doing quietly in the Kurdistan region took Talabani's office by surprise. Although Talabani would probably have preferred to keep this situation under the radar, he likely felt that the media exchange between Barzani, Mutlak, and Maliki necessitated a public response - and defense - from him. While the Kurds' animus towards the Baath Party-designed flag is understandable, what is less clear is the timing of the Kurdistan Decree No. 60 and the publicity surrounding it. Karadaghi admitted privately that he thought the timing of

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Barzani's announcement was poor, but claimed he did not know the reason why Barzani did it. With the upcoming reconvening of the Council of Representatives on September 5, the Kurds may be seeking to underscore the constitutional preference for regional laws in areas not specified as under the exclusive authority of the federal government. On the flag issue, the way forward may come in the form of the CoR Deputy Speaker's reported consideration of a special committee to address the issue.

KHALILZAD